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ABSTRACT

Parental perspectives on family learning were examined through focus group discussions with parents who had participated in family learning courses at a nursery school, primary school, secondary school, and family support center in London, England. Five focus group discussions with a total of 25 family learning course participants, 2 in-depth interviews with family learning course participants, and 1 focus group discussion with 4 nonparticipating parents were conducted. The "participating" parents conceptualized family learning very broadly, as an entity involving a wide network of people, activities, and places. The "participating" parents saw family learning as a means to gaining qualifications, improving their employment situation, increasing their stimulation, increasing their contact with others, gaining more confidence, and enabling them to teach their children more and better prepare them for their future. The barriers to participation in family learning cited by the "participating parents" included lack of time, lack of physical and financial support for child care, and poor accessibility/availability of courses. Compared with the "participating parents," the "nonparticipating" parents conceptualized family learning very similarly but cited many more disadvantages of and barriers to participation. Twenty-one recommendations regarding the marketing, design, and delivery of family learning programs were formulated based on the focus group findings. (Contains 23 references.) (MN)

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WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING RESEARCH REPORT NO.2

Parental Perspectives of Family Learning

Angela Brassett-Grundy

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Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

PARENTAL PERSPECTIVES OF FAMILY LEARNING

Angela Brassett-Grundy

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Executive Summary

1. This report is based on a three-month qualitative research project carried out in response to a request from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (in its former guise as the Department for Education and Employment - DfEE), to investigate parents' perspectives of family learning.

2. The findings are based upon five focus group discussions with a total of twenty-five family learning course participants, two in-depth interviews with family learning course participants, and one focus group discussion with four non-participating parents (i.e. thirty-one parents in total).

3. The results show that 'participating' parents conceptualised family learning very broadly, involving a wide network of people, activities and places. Numerous benefits were cited operating on many levels, which accrued to themselves, their children and others, as a result of their participation. Reasons for the success of each course were discussed and improvements suggested. Very few disadvantages of attending the course could be identified and the overall feeling was incredibly positive with all participants having enjoyed their course very much indeed.

4. The results from the 'non-participating' parents showed that they conceptualised family learning very similarly to the participating parents. Whilst they envisaged that there were possible benefits to themselves, their children and others, as a result of participating in family learning, they could think of numerous disadvantages and spoke of the many barriers to their involvement in learning in general. They had definite ideas of how family learning courses should be designed and how people might be encouraged to attend. After a certain amount of initial scepticism, these parents concluded that family learning was in fact an important issue and the lasting impression formed was one of their need to be coaxed and encouraged to participate, with promises of adequate support and follow-up.

5. Recommendations are made based upon these results, bearing in mind the research caveats outlined at the start of the report. These recommendations focus upon three areas: (1) the manner in which family learning courses are marketed; (2) the manner in which family learning courses should be structured; and, (3) the qualities that family learning teachers should possess.

6. This report concludes there is a need for a clear policy in this area and that family learning initiatives would benefit from better planning at the centre and longer-term funding to promote more even, equitable and responsive provision. Suggestions are also made for future research in this area.

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Jean	A London borough Numeracy Consultant
Linda	A London borough Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator
Musseret	Member of a London borough Lifelong Learning Team

The names of the parents and their children, used throughout this report, have been changed to maintain anonymity.

1. Research caveats

This document describes a qualitative research project relating to parental views of family learning, and the conclusions which can be drawn and the recommendations, which can be made as a result. However, some of the shortcomings of this research should be mentioned initially, to be borne in mind when reading this document (which are addressed more fully in the 'discussion' towards the end of this report):

- Data collection was focused primarily on those people who were involved, or who had been involved, in a family learning course ('participants') and less so on those who had *not* attended family learning courses ('non-participants').
- The courses which participant parents had attended were either literacy or numeracy courses, which were all delivered during the day. Parents who attended other types of family learning course were *not* involved in this research and thus recommendations made or conclusions drawn can only be in relation to day-time run literacy and numeracy programmes.
- All but one of the participants were female, which might introduce a heavy gender bias to the views reported.
- All parents interviewed were living in London, and the courses that 'participants' had attended had been run in one of two London boroughs. This may bring a geographical bias into the results.
- A positive skew to the results might be expected owing to the fact that teachers on the courses volunteered to have their 'student' parents interviewed and, as such, I may only have interviewed those on successful courses.
- The parents on these courses were 'self-selecting' and one could assume that these are the types of people who are more interested in their children's education, which could also introduce a positive skew to the results.
- Finally, this is a very short and small-scale piece of research, providing only a snapshot of the views of a handful of parents in relation to family learning issues, and again, one should be cautious about generalising these findings to the population at large.

2. Introduction

The DfEE's Green Paper 'The Learning Age' (1998) states that, along with community and adult learning, family learning is "essential in the learning age". The subject of family learning has become increasingly a popular subject for research, and attempts have been made to raise its public profile through Family Learning Weekend, Adult Learners' Week and initiatives such as Sure Start. The family is widely regarded as an important site for learning (Goleman, 1996), where children are exposed to others' attitudes to learning (Innes, 1999), and develop their own long-term learning identities (Gorard et al., 1998). Indeed, parents are recognised as the earliest and most significant educators (Alexander, 1997).

2.1 Defining 'family learning'

But how should family learning be defined? Haggart (2000) describes family learning as:

> "what people outside the family do to enable and facilitate the learning that goes on in families" (p. 3).

Buffton (1999) defines family learning as that which:

> "supports efforts to raise children's achievement levels, raises expectations and aspirations of both children and adults, promotes active citizenship and, as the family group is the microcosm of the community, is community capacity building at its best" (p. 12).

She goes on to suggest that family learning should incorporate: tackling individual learning needs; parental learning about issues pertinent to the family; two or more family members learning about the same topic independently; two or more family members learning together; and, two or more family members learning together with progression routes. In her opinion, family learning should move beyond literacy courses, introducing new and familiar subjects in a broad and balanced curriculum, if it is to bring about long-lasting change in attitudes to learning.

An alternative definition, provided in the OFSTED report (2000) on family learning, describes it as:

> "learning which brings together different family members to work on a common theme for some, if not for the whole, of a planned programme" (p. 5)

A document produced by The Campaign for Learning, The National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and the Scottish Council Foundation (2000), however, suggests that definitions of family learning should go beyond this. They feel it should recognise that it is mostly intergenerational, can be formal or informal, can be undertaken outside formal institutions or in conjunction with them, and with or without professional support.

Despite the number of differing definitions of family learning which are in circulation, most would agree that family learning is one of the critical elements of lifelong learning. The broadest view of this would encompass inter-generational learning, parental involvement in children's education, and parenting skills. But what of the opinions of those who might get involved in family learning? How do they define or conceptualise family learning? How do they think family learning should be organised and structured? Where do they think family learning should take place? Who do they think should be involved in family learning?

2.2 Benefits of family learning – past research

A wealth of research has demonstrated the benefits of family learning. For example it has been shown that parental levels of education at time of birth are critically important factors in determining children's cognitive development and educational success throughout school (Bynner et al., 1999; Roberts et al., 1999) and that parental involvement in school has positive effects on children's educational performances (Bynner and Steedman, 1995; Central Advisory Council - Plowden Report, 1967; ILEA – Hargreaves Report, 1984; Parsons and Bynner, 1998). It has also been demonstrated that: school success is influenced by families' positive attitudes towards learning and school (Bowman, 1994; Kagan, 1994; Ramsay and Ramsay, 1992); early

experience of sharing stories and books affects progress children make at school (Toomey, 1993; Wade 1984; Wells, 1985); and, attention and concentration in the home assists learning in primary schools (Rowe, 1995). Parents also gain from family learning. Indeed, one of the most impressive results for the evaluation of the Basic Skills Agency's 'Family Literacy' programme, related to the lasting gains made by parents in their own reading, through the medium of working with their children (Brooks et al, 1996).

2.3 Research implications - current research

These are just some of the things which family learning projects set out to develop and promote. So, we know that family learning initiatives work but how and why? What works best and for whom?

It would appear that a large-scale, longitudinal, quantitative, evaluative piece of research is implicated to answer these questions. However, before embarking upon such a venture, a smaller-scale, qualitative project has been devised, the purpose of which is to unpack some of the pertinent issues and themes relating to family learning, as relevant to the parents who attend, or might attend, these courses. This might then inform a larger-scale, quantitative research project.

This research thus aims to obtain the perspective of the *families themselves* on: what family learning might look like to them; what their expectations of it might be; how they would want it to happen and where; what they might get out of it; and, what is the right way of describing it from their point of view (i.e. a bottom-up approach). It was decided that a series of focus group discussions with 'participating' and 'non-participating' parents would be the best way to achieve these aims.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Recruiting research participants

The family learning co-ordinator for a London borough was originally contacted to request her assistance with recruiting local parents for this research. At the same time the literacy and numeracy consultants in the same borough were contacted to see if they too could be of any help. The family learning co-ordinator indicated that she was unable to help and thus I focused my search on an alternative London borough. I initially contacted the Lifelong Learning Co-ordinator within the Education Department there, who was very co-operative. In a meeting with one of her colleagues I explained the research and emphasised the need to interview parents from a range of backgrounds and diversity of experience who had participated in a range of family learning courses, as well as parents who had not participated in a family learning course. She then took on the responsibility of contacting the teachers who were running family learning courses at a number of centres within the borough, and distributing a 'flyer' leaflet I had designed to give parents more information about the research.

Focus group discussions were timetabled thereafter, during which I would talk to parents who had participated in family learning courses at a nursery school, a primary school, a secondary school and a family support centre. These were scheduled to take place at the location in which the family learning course was run, during their normal class time. Two focus group discussions were also set up to talk to parents who had not participated in a family-learning course, at an early years centre and a primary school. All of these institutions were spread widely throughout the borough.

In the meantime, the numeracy consultant I had contacted in the original London borough replied to say that I was welcome to go along to her two groups to ask the parents there whether they would like to participate in a focus group discussion. During each of these visits both groups of parents agreed to be 'interviewed' during their next class the following week.

3.2 Research instruments

Two 'topic guides' were developed from which to steer each discussion: one for use with participating parents; and, one for use with non-participating parents. These were designed to allow parents to talk about learning and family learning in general, before probing deeper into their attitudes towards, and experiences of, family learning. These guides were designed in order to allow each discussion to last for between one hour and one and a half hours, depending on the number of participants.

3.3 Procedure

The fieldwork was undertaken during late February and early March 2001, when I visited each group of parents to carry out the focus group discussions. In each instance I requested that the family learning teacher left the room, to allow parents' freedom of expression, and I attempted to ensure that we were not disturbed by other staff, parents or children. In one exception, where all participants spoke English as a second language, the teacher remained present to assist translation. After organising the parents into a group around a table, upon which the recording equipment was placed, I first introduced myself, briefly explained what the purpose of the discussion was, and obtained consent to tape-record the session. Following this, the tape recorder was switched on and I began asking participants to introduce themselves in turn, as an 'ice -breaker'. A discussion was then developed from there with reference to the relevant topic guide.

Each group of parents that I met appeared to be quite anxious when I first met them. Some were still involved in their class activities and kept their heads down in an attempt to focus on their work and avoid eye contact with me. Once I had introduced myself and asked them to form a circle around my recording equipment, they seemed to relax far more and became less suspicious of my presence and motives. Thereafter I found it very easy to quickly build up a good rapport with each group, the members of which were comfortably able to express some very personal thoughts and feelings.

The parents in each group discussion largely agreed with each other. They seemed to raise very similar issues and were able to develop a train of thought amongst themselves. There was only one instance where disagreement occurred, between two women regarding how to encourage other parents to attend family learning courses. Thus, the parents interviewed seemed to have formed very similar opinions of their experiences, which they discussed in a respectful fashion.

One of the meetings that had been arranged with a group of non-participants at an early years centre had to be cancelled owing to illness, and I was unsuccessful at rearranging this group discussion. In addition, one of the group discussions arranged at a primary school was attended by only two parents who each arrived separately and thus two in-depth interviews were carried out in its place. Thus the results reported here are based upon five focus group discussions with family learning course participants, two in-depth interviews with family learning course participants, and one focus group discussion with non-participating parents.

4. Results from 'participants'

4.1 Characteristics of parents

Ages	range 24-50 years.
Gender	26 females; 1 male. (Although the courses were populated mainly by females, there were one or two males that, apparently, attended each course. However, it was a matter of circumstance that on the days the focus group discussions were carried out, overall, only one male attended.)
Ethnicity	14 White British; 3 Afro-Caribbean; 2 Pakistani; 1 Indian; 1 Bangladeshi; 1 Sri Lankan; 1 Arab; 1 Nepalese; 1 Egyptian; 1 Turkish; 1 Polish.
Marital Status	19 married; 4 cohabiting; 4 single.
No. of children	total 63; range 1-5.
Ages of children	range 5 months-19 years.
Age at first birth	range 16-35 years.
Education	2 dropped out at 15; 1 left at 15 and went on to YTS; 3 left at 16 with C&G/CSEs; 2 left at 16 with 'O' levels; 1 left at 18 with no qualifications; 1 left at 18 with 'O' levels; 1 left at 18 with 'A' levels; 1 left at 18 – qualifications unknown; 5 went to FE college and gained vocational qualifications; 3 possess sub-degree qualifications (Diplomas, HNCs); 2 possess first degrees; 3 possess Masters degrees; 2 qualifications/school leaving age unknown.
Employment	1 in full-time work; 2 in part-time work; 24 not employed (2 of whom in part-time education).

4.2 Characteristics of the courses

4.2.1 Summary

Number	6
Type	4 numeracy; 2 literacy.
Status	at time of research: 5 still in progress; 1 finished.
Length	3-4 months
Frequency of attendance	1-2 sessions per week; 2-7 hours per week.
Numbers attending	average of 3-11 regular attendees per course (from originally 7–15).

4.2.2 Detail

1. *Location*	**London borough 1 - Nursery Centre**
Frequency/length	parents attend once a week for 3 months 2 hours each week – first hour with children, second hour with other parents
Staff	teacher and a nursery assistant
Total number of parents attending	up to 12 parents originally attended – now down to 6
Age of children participating	pre-school/nursery-aged
Content	numeracy with children: learn how children are taught; counting; drawing; colouring; shop prices. with parents: make counting games; make clocks; create a folder of work. take a maths game home each week from the toy library
Certification	a certificate of attendance and achievement will be awarded
Number of parents involved in research	3 – only one of whom possessed educational qualifications, which were very basic.

2. *Location*	**London borough 1 - Primary School**
Frequency/length	parents attend once a week for 3 months 2 hours each week – first hour with children, second hour with other parents
Staff	teacher and a nursery assistant
Total number of parents attending	number of parents originally attending unknown – now 6 regular attendees
Age of children participating	pre-school/nursery-aged
Content	numeracy with children: learn how to teach them; colours, shapes, sizes; counting songs; days of the week; growing seeds. with parents: make counting games and board games; create a folder of work. take a maths game home each week from the toy library
Number of parents involved in research	5 – one of these had a Masters degree, one had a B.Sc., one had vocational college qualifications and two had received only a basic education.

3. *Location*	**London borough 2 - Primary School**
Frequency/length	parents attend once a week for 4 months. 2.5 hours each week – first two hours with other parents, last half-hour with children
Staff	teacher
Total number of parents attending	8 parents originally attended – now down to 3
Age of children participating	pre-school/nursery-aged
Content	numeracy evaluation form completed at the start to assess abilities with children: play counting games; sing songs. with parents: learn maths, tax, insurance, budgeting; make counting games, cubes; create a folder of work.
Certification	a certificate of achievement will be awarded
Number of parents involved in research	2 – both had stayed on at school until they were 18-years-old – one had passed 'A' levels.

4. *Location*	**London borough 2 – Family Support Centre**
Frequency/length	parents attend twice a week for 4 months 3 hours each session – first two hours with other parents, last hour with children = 6 hours each week
Staff	teacher and a nursery assistant
Total number of parents attending	7 parents originally attended – now down to 5
Age of children participating	pre-school/nursery-aged
Content	literacy with children: watch them; listen to them; interact/play with them; monitor their motor skills and co-ordination. with parents: 'word-power'; communication; directions; map-reading; writing an autobiography; filling out forms; writing formal letters; write an evaluation at end of each session of what children enjoyed and learnt; create a folder of work.
Certification	a City & Guilds certificate will be awarded
Number of parents involved in research	5 – one of who had vocational college qualifications; the remainder possessed only the most basic educational qualifications.

5. *Location*	**London borough 2 - Secondary School**
Frequency/length	parents attended twice a week for 3 months. 3.5 hours each session – first two hours with other parents, last hour with children = 7 hours each week
Staff	teacher and a class assistant
Total number of parents attending	15 parents originally attended – finished with 12
Age of children Participating	11-14-years-old

Content	literacy with children: reading, writing and speaking English; story-writing; essay-writing; family tree; autobiography; computer work; trip to Science Museum. with parents: reading, writing and speaking English; filling in forms, e.g. job applications; letter-writing.
Certification	a certificate of achievement was awarded
Number of parents involved in research	4 – one of these possessed a teaching degree and an economics degree, one possessed a nursing qualification and two possessed basic educational qualifications.

6. *Location*	**London borough 2 - Nursery School**
Frequency/length	parents attend once a week for 3.5 months. 2.5 hours each week – half the group are with the children and half the group are on own; then they swap over halfway through the session.
Staff	teacher and a nursery assistant
Total number of parents attending	15 parents originally attended – now down to 11
Age of children participating	pre-school/nursery-aged
Content	numeracy with children: interact/play with them; learn how to teach them; trip to local library. with parents: general maths depending on ability level – volume, fractions, percentages, prices; create a folder of work.
Certification	a certificate of achievement will be awarded
Number of parents involved in research	8 – the most well-educated group: one had a Masters degree; one had a B.A.; two had sub-degree qualifications; three had college-level qualifications; and, one had left school at 16 years old with 'O' levels.

4.3 Characteristics of the areas in which courses were located

London borough 1

The first London borough has a very diverse population living in a fairly even mix of public and private housing. The proportion of owner-occupied households has risen rapidly during the last decade. About 24% of the local population is from ethnic minorities and there has recently been a high influx of refugees and asylum seekers, who lack basic skills and English as a second language.

This borough is ranked as more deprived than London borough 2, yet it has a fairly even number of the most deprived and the least deprived wards in London. Many people commute into the borough for work, however, the unemployment compares unfavourably to the greater London average (5.6%). However, here again the variations across the borough are huge with some wards having a rate of less than 5% and some wards having more than 11%. Although there are many adults with level 4 qualifications in this borough, a large minority have no educational qualifications of any kind.

The borough also exhibits a contrast in its physical environment. It has numerous conservation areas covering a large percentage of the borough and contains many listed buildings. There is a wealth of townscapes from urban villages, through more inner city-style environments, to commercial and business areas.

London borough 2

The second London borough is very heavily populated and, not unlike London borough 1, there is a diverse ethnic mix with one-quarter of inhabitants from minority ethnic origin, including asylum seekers. There is also a small yet growing proportion that is claiming homelessness. Many people also commute into this borough for work and to visit the large retail centre and cultural and tourist facilities.

Social and economic deprivation is unevenly distributed across the borough, with some electoral wards being amongst the most deprived in London. The unemployment rate is close to the average for all London boroughs, yet, as with deprivation, there are pockets of higher unemployment in some parts. A large number of resident lone parents are on Income Support and the borough has a large number of Housing Benefit claimants.

4.4 Parents' comments

The following section reports the comments made by participating parents in accordance with the manner in which the focus group topic guide was structured. On the whole, this covered: concepts of learning and family learning; involvement in children's learning; motivations to learn and barriers to learning; benefits and disbenefits of family learning; ways in which family learning courses could be improved; and, ways in which others might be encouraged to attend. Quotes are used to illustrate the various points raised.

- Learning was conceptualised as anything from something very formal and structured in an educational setting, to something far less structured and more informal taking place in almost all of everyday life.

> *"Discipline. You have to discipline yourself to be able to learn. If you don't want to do it then you can't – you won't be able to do it." [Lucy]*

- Learning was seen both practically as a means to an end, i.e. to gain a qualification to help get a good job, and as something that is fun and expressive which could result in enhanced self-awareness.

- Family learning was conceptualised as anything from parents playing with their children at home and helping them with homework, to understanding what children do in school, to getting all of the family involved in helping with children. Many parents reiterated the philosophy of adult education, agreeing that family learning was about adults learning too.

> *"You learn to set aside time to be with the children...family learning is learning as a unit. It could be anything from learning to interact with each other on different levels...when you're sitting down of an evening with your children doing Maths and English and reading and things like that. Just being with them all the time, teaching them what you can." [Tina]*

> *"Learning together. Just because we're adults, doesn't mean that we've learnt everything and as our children come through school, I'm sure that we'll be learning things through them." [Harriet]*

- Family learning usually involves parents, children, grandparents, godparents and friends. In some instances it was seen as including people on television, people in the street and health professionals. In some circumstances, such a wide support network does not exist and family learning only takes place between mothers and their children.

> *"In my case I'm just by myself - we don't have any help from the father...It's quite a hard job on me, like, I have to do everything by myself. So it's like, I do feel something missing with her father not being around." [Afet]*

> *"Me! You've got doctors, health visitors; they're all involved in family learning. Even friends. [Grandparents] treat them differently, they've got experience, [they] play with them – they have a better understanding of them; they've already done it and got more knowledge and more time." [Kayleigh]*

> *"It can be part of a crowd – other family members, like grandparents, their uncles, or even cousins – they can learn from their cousins, from their friends, from everyone". [Jambayang]*

- Family learning was widely recognised as taking place everywhere, including the home, the street, health centres, after-school clubs, and outings to the zoo or seaside.

> *"It depends on whether you make it a learning experience. You know, walking down the road I often draw Lewis' attention to things like the fact that the leaves are starting to grow and we talk about Spring, so it's just sort of starting to pay attention to what's happening around us." [Harriet]*

- The majority of parents stated that they took an active interest in their children's education. On the whole this involved talking to the teacher when there was a concern or attending parents' evenings, however, some parents had been (or were) classroom assistants and a few had joined the PTA. One parent sat on the board of governors.

"I helped in the nursery...[My daughter] was in the play group before she came here and it was a hassle having to go every week, but it was something I enjoyed because I got to see her playing and learning and that was one of the drawbacks when she came here - you took her in the morning and you came and picked her up and you didn't know what happened in between. So now I don't do nothing to be honest to help the school in any way." [Phoebe]

- Motivation to learn was either to do something for oneself or to do something for one's children. In relation to themselves, parents were motivated to: gain qualifications; improve their employment situation; be more stimulated; have contact with others; or, gain more confidence.

"I don't like feeling like a dead-head...just to get somewhere near that goal [of being an accountant] because I'm miserable if I don't meet my goals...Eventually in a year or two I want to go back to work...I don't want a kitchen job or things like that anymore, I've decided already just through doing this course and realising that I can count, and them things, that I don't want that sort of job...I want to start working my way back up to being confident enough to go for interviews for office jobs... To give my kids a better future and financial support...I want to be a better role model." [Tina]

"My mum couldn't help me when I left school, couldn't help me with my homework. She didn't have a good education and I don't want it to be the same for my daughter." [Andrea]

In relation to their children, parents were motivated to: be able to teach them more; prepare them for their future; do more for their children than their own parents had for them; and, better understand the education system.

"When I think about learning now it's for the children...it's like trying to get all the information they need to just do what they need to do. When they finish school they go out into the big wide world, so they can achieve all of the knowledge that they need...Just to set a good example to the children, to show them that, and to provide for them as well, to go to work...It's about you doing something and achieving something; you're achieving something for yourself – your own goal. To have social interaction with others. Getting a better education for my children than I had." [Ellen]

"I'm interested in children's education. I want them to be good educated persons and good, better citizens, so I joined these sessions so I can get involved with my children. And want to learn the system you know because this is...I'm not educated here or studied here. I want to help my children. I want to improve myself as well. It will improve myself and my children will get benefit from this. ...I want to help my children...and if they will be good persons, good education, it will be reward for me and it will be better for the future. I will feel proud if they will do good, and I'm struggling for this." [Mena]

- Things which might prevent these parents from learning included: *practical issues* such as time and lack of physical and financial support for childcare; *personal issues* such as low confidence and lack of will-power; *course-related issues* such as poor accessibility and poor availability; and, issues related to *other people* such as negative attitudes and a lack of emotional support.

"Boredom. If it's boring or I can't understand it, I won't even bother...Some people treat me stupid; you say you're doing extra English at our ages, 'What do you want to do that for? What you don't know now you're never going to know!', and I think if you're put down enough you won't do it." [Jeannette]

"[Lack of] encouragement. If you're disencouraging me in something - if you say, 'You're not learning, you cannot understand' - if you show me that behaviour, I do not go, I don't want to." [Rashida]

"You can't afford to go to college or university because you can't pay the fees, you can't pay the childcare because you're not working because you're studying so it's just like a no-win situation. It wouldn't have to be so much 'free' - you don't mind paying something but you...I personally went when my daughter was young, I did go to college again then. They had a crèche there and I paid £2.50 a week, so once she was out of nappies she could go in there and that was fine. She started when I started and she finished when I finished and I could afford £2.50, £3.00 a week, that was fine – give them their lunch – but now its not like that. They have to be over a certain age for the colleges to take on responsibility – it really isn't as easy as it seems." [Phoebe]

- The benefits that parents identified relating to their participation in a family learning course could be divided into four areas:

(1) *child-related* – where they became more aware of how to teach their children and the opportunities available to do so in everyday life;

> *"I quite like...playing a small part of Kathryn's nursery because she says to me, 'Oh is it a numeracy day today?' - she likes the fact that I'm here...You're seeing them in this environment, where, I think, they change. They're really independent; it's really exciting for parents to see your child thriving like that without you and just to see how they learn and ask other people questions. Plus, I actually like coming in and doing activities here because you feel a part of the whole learning process that they're experiencing." [Chullaki]*

> *"My daughter's personality. I've seen more of her personality since I've been seeing her at school. She's very different at home to how she is at school – it's like two completely different children. My Dad brought her to school the other day and said once they got through the school gates, it wasn't like it was Georgia. She's a completely different child, very, very different. Like indoors she kind of floats around – she's like a little airhead, you know, nothing kind of goes in – but when she's at school she's kind of focused on things...At home I was getting frustrated with her because I was trying to sit with her, trying to do things – 'I just don't want to, I just can't', you know, but when I come into the school and I do it with her I feel like I can do it better." [Phoebe]*

(2) *other-related* – where they gained from meeting new people, making friends and developing a new support network;

> *"You also meet people, lots of different people. You get a better understanding of what everyone else is going through. The learning is a bonus...you've got a nice support network. I mean, if you've got a problem, you can approach the people that are teaching you or you've got another parent doing the course with you that will help." [Kayleigh]*

(3) *practical* – where they gained new knowledge, or were awarded a certificate, which motivated them to want progress to other courses;

> *"For the first time I went to the 24-month check-up with my daughter by myself without taking anyone [to interpret] - I was very proud." [Yasmeen – on a course learning English as a second language]*

and, (4) *emotional* – where they felt they were discovering their 'old selves', reawakening their brains and gaining more confidence.

> *"I already know my brain is starting to wake up and I feel a better person for it. By doing something like this it's made me feel more like my old self, the person I like being. It's already making me feel ready to be capable enough of branching off into doing other courses...It's made me feel more alive in my own way, got my brain going, given me more self-confidence, motivation big time. It's also a release from my day-to-day normal living, you know, it's like a little social gathering as well...it's important to me, it has done a lot for me...I'm starting to get a direction in life." [Tina]*

- Clear benefits were also recognised in relation to the children that took part in the course. These included improved reading, improved vocabulary, improved concentration, better relationships with other children and adults, increased confidence and more respect for their parents as better role-models.

> *"The one-to-one interaction is great because I don't get a lot of time to give him the time and attention that he needs – it's just one-to-one for a solid hour, trying to absorb it all...I can see my son's definitely learning from it, I mean, once a day he'll pick up on something he learnt in the group...So it pushes me to carry on with it because I can see he's really benefiting from it, really gaining." [Ellen]*

> *"Socialising, because my daughter, she don't go to many people, she's very clingy and coming here, it's helped her..... My daughter has got a speech problem...special language disorder, and trying to mix her with other children might encourage her to talk." [Davina]*

> *"My children, very very happy and improved...English, spelling, writing – better. Computers... Better in stories and better in English, writing and interested in education. His education is better and better with his teacher...[The day] before [the course] the children are very interested, before they want to know, tomorrow, 'Don't forget!'" [Rafiq]*

> *"The friendships that are formed, which I think benefit your child – to be in an environment where they feel they have more than one good friend. It's such a good thing, they feel that their confidence is strengthened, you get more confident but they do too, and these are the hidden benefits of the course." [Taniesha]*

- The benefits cited which accrue to others as a result of parents attending the course included: *other family members* to whom course information could be passed; *future educators* who would benefit from more able children; and, *everyone* that the parents might communicate with as a result of their enhanced self-esteem and improved social skills. Some had a very global view in that they felt all of *society* would benefit.

> *"Learning new methods that they teach now, these universal methods at school and the infant language, I'm passing that information on to my husband so that he's in a position to help our children as well. Even though he isn't attending the course, he benefits in a way, from passing on information." [Chullaki]*

> *"The bodies that run these courses benefit because we participate so therefore they think that it's well worthwhile..., 'We'll do some more' and that they've found that here is an area that's sort of untapped, you know, where people are wanting to learn and I suppose, you know, in a way it just gives you a taste that when you pass that period where your children are so dependent upon you, it might just encourage you to go out there and learn a bit more. So in a bigger sense it benefits society at the end of the day because you've already had like a preliminary taste of a course." [Taniesha]*

- The reasons given for the course being successful could be divided into three areas:

  (1) the *practical organisation* of the course, e.g. free crèche for younger children, diversity of topics studied, flexibility of what to study, small numbers, friendly and informal atmosphere;

> *"This is ideal when someone's looking after the kids...your time's your own." [Cindy]*

> *"And it's a funny time when you have children, when you've been working and then you give up working and you have the children, you do lose a lot of confidence; you've been taken out of that environment where you feel confident and you know what you're doing. So even if you've been in a professional career before having your children, suddenly you do lose a lot of confidence and to actually go somewhere else with people you don't know – sounds silly – but it is quite a difficult thing. So this is a safe environment." [Harriet]*

(2) the *other people* attending the course, e.g. friendly, non-judgemental, keen to learn;

> *"It's who we're with. There's no one that thinks they're too bigheaded to be here... Some of us knew each other anyway, we've seen each other about." [Jeannette]*

> *"Also that it's with people that you know, even though you didn't know them very well before, you don't feel so limited about saying things or asking questions. You know, when you're in a room with strangers you just keep to yourself." [Chullaki]*

and, (3) the *teacher*, e.g. supportive, encouraging, non-intimidating, respectful.

> *"[The teacher] is doing a good job, she's very supportive, she encourages [the children] nicely. She's a very calm person...she knows the way to talk to them and encourage them at the same time. Their attention is going away and she knows how to bring them back." [Afet]*

> *"We're all at different levels. We've all got subjects that we want to brush up upon, fractions, so she's covering quite a lot but she'll make sure you understand without making you look thick." [Beverley]*

> *"She will group us, take our details of what we want and direct us. Some are on the basic level, some are on second level - I am on the third level...She didn't tell anybody at the start we are starting all together and after that, little by little, she knows our levels." [Vidu]*

- Very few disadvantages of attending the course could be identified, but where mentioned, they related to either:

(1) the *parents* themselves, e.g. a lack of time to complete all units of the course, worry that when it ended there would be a void to fill;

> *"We've still got another two stages to do – we've only got stage one behind us. We don't think they're going to fund it. [The Centre Manager] is quite prepared to let us do it, [the teacher] as far as we know, she hasn't got any other commitments, is quite prepared to take us through but we haven't got the funding...I'd like to finish all the units...[When I've missed a class] I feel like I'm letting people down...as if I was letting these [other groups members] down" [Jeannette]*

> *"When I've had to work then there's no...way of catching up what you've missed out." [Taniesha]*

> *"I find this morning a bit stressful...we were aiming to get here at 9 a.m., to do the activity with our children, and I found that difficult – you know with the two, getting them ready and the traffic's really bad driving here because I have to bring the car on this day and then we go out straight from here, so I find it quite a busy morning, you know, to get everything ready." [Harriet]*

or, (2) their *children*, e.g. disruption caused to the children being removed and returned to normal classes, having to leave other children with other carers;

> *"Only when you want to bring her back into the nursery and settling her down – she doesn't want to go back – that's the only thing for me. It takes a while to settle her back in." [Alison]*

> *"I've noticed that what we've been doing here, about two weeks later they start to do the same thing downstairs in my daughter's class, so she's done it and she doesn't want to do it again and she starts to get distracted." [Phoebe]*

- When asked how their family learning course could have been improved, the few responses elicited were related to the already reported disadvantages to attending, i.e. increasing the course length to enable all of the work units/modules to be completed would be an improvement. One parent mentioned the target group of parents these courses should be aimed at.

> *"It would be better if it ran for the term rather than just for twelve weeks – if it started for the term because it's taken until up to now for the children to get into the routine, to know they're coming, to do their thing, for them all to be sitting down." [Lucy]*

> *"What you were saying about what sort of people they were targeting, I'm not sure that actually they've got the right people that they wanted. We're all really interested in our children's education anyway and we're all literate and numerate and all that but you know you were saying, that they were trying to target people that weren't. I think if you signed up for this sort of thing then you're that way inclined." [Chullaki]*

- Some parents reported having already been on another course and many parents said that they would like to take part in another family learning course. Some were planning to enrol in more formal courses at college and some felt that this had been the start of their pathway back to work.

> *"I've done one that was more based not on numbers but on letters. I'd attend anything where you were getting the one-to-one and they were actually gaining from it, learning and progressing, I'd try to attend, if he was gaining from it, improving and learning...When [my younger one] reaches three I'll probably do more courses, find out what he's interested in." [Ellen]*

> *"Hopefully I'm going to do a Childcare course when this finishes; it's given me the confidence to do a Childcare course...I was doing City and Guilds Maths at [a local] School and found it quite hard...I wasn't getting as much help as what [our teacher] is giving us on this course." [Cindy]*

- When asked how others might be encouraged to attend, these parents emphasised the need to provide clear and simple information about what to expect, that the benefits to the children should be emphasised, that open days should be promoted and that talking to parents who had already been on the course would help.

"Other people, they haven't got as much will-power or just haven't hit the right time in their life where they can stand up for themselves...Another aspect of the course was I said to Kayleigh, 'Do you fancy it?' – Me and Kayleigh get on, we're friends...and an extra bit of a boost or a bonus was the fact that I knew she was going to be sitting in here when I arrived so I wasn't just going to be walking in going, 'Oh God', you know, a room full of strangers." [Tina]

"I think really the only way is an open day: let people come and see the work; let them talk to the teachers who'll be running the class; let them talk to the pupils that have done the exam or that particular course." [Jeannette]

"I'd say to people that it's very enjoyable here – learning is fun; that we do lots of writing as well as reading as well as speaking so all things are covered. It'll be good for you to learn English – come just once or twice to see what it's like so that you're not worried about it." [Rafiq]

"I do tend to sort of disagree with that thing about people that are like a certain group who'll never be interested because I went on the parenting courses and they were always really full because when you've been on them I think your exuberance of being on them to someone else encourages them to go because you're telling them at a different level...you're telling them about your experience and once you tell someone about your experience of being involved, that sells it much more than reading it in black and white...All those letters, you know, you get mounds and mounds of literature coming from this place...Maybe a more visual thing, something more permanent in the nursery where you couldn't miss it, as opposed to very unattractive black and white letter." [Taniesha]

Thus, the overall feeling was incredibly positive with all participants having enjoyed their course very much indeed.

"Family learning is a good way to start...It helps you mould your children, I believe, for the better... Eventually my kids are going to grow up and leave me; I don't want to be left sitting on my arse without a job doing nothing – not me." [Tina]

"It's good to be able to interact with your child in school, definitely. I didn't have it and I know – I think – if I did, if my Mum and Dad were more 'into' my education then I would have done a lot better...I would have done more – been involved more, probably the after-school clubs or reading clubs or things that were going on rather than just not being able to wait to get out of the doors the minute the bell rang...It's nice to break the ice as well with mothers and children from other countries. I'm not in the habit of just walking up to other people and going, 'Hello' and introducing myself but when you're put in this situation and your children see that you make friends, it's easier for them to make friends as well in the class. If they're in the class and they don't know anyone, they think, 'That's alright because my Mum knows their Mum so I'm going to play with them' and it makes it easier for them to make friends". [Phoebe]

4.5 Teachers' Comments

One teacher, who sat in on a focus group as a translator, spoke of some of the practical problems the school had encountered in running a course (which had been directed at improving parents' and children's mastery of written and spoken English). She mentioned that some children had to miss classes to attend the course and that parents did not get enough opportunity to use the IT facilities. She also mentioned some of the positive ways that parents had been influenced through attending such a course:

> *"There was a wide range of abilities. Yasmeen, who was beginners, never really attempted to speak English before she actually started attending the classes and she told me, 'Oh well I can't come I don't know anything' and I said, 'Well that's exactly what we want – we want people who don't know anything'. Yasmeen attended regularly – she had wonderful attendance."*

> *"We've already heard from parents who've heard about the class and would like us to start another one. So we're thinking of starting another one for people who are not necessarily parents at our school but who are wanting to learn English."*

Written comments from other teachers, who taught these children in their normal classes, were also provided, all of which were positive. They focused on the improved skills, behaviour, attitude and motivation of those children involved.

> *"Caleb and Khadiga both show greater confidence and are more motivated. They ask questions more readily and seem happier in lessons."*

> *"Bharat and Suneet, two pupils who did not communicate much, are now more ready to ask and answer questions during the family literacy sessions as well as whole class situations. Their confidence in spoken and written English has improved."*

4.6 Children's comments

Written comments were also obtained from the pupils of the parents who were on the course, which was designed to improve written and spoken English as a second language. These were contained on feedback forms that had been collected at the end of the course, and made available by the teacher. These showed that the children seemed to appreciate the tranquillity of the classroom atmosphere, talking in their first language, working with their parents and learning something about their past.

> *"It helped working in small bilingual group because everyone was doing work – no noise, more attention. I understood talk because others explained in my language." [Nilay]*

> *"I enjoyed having lesson with my Mum because she can tell me what happen to me in the past. I like doing things in computer and learning English. I also like learning about my country and I learned here so I am enjoying. ...More information from my Mother is family stories and what I am look like and what I do in the past and how I am born." [Bharat]*

5. Results from 'non-participants'

5.1 Characteristics of parents

Ages	range 23-34 years.
Gender	4 females
Ethnicity	4 White British
Marital Status	1 married; 2 cohabiting; 1 single.
No. of children	total 14; range 2-5.
Ages of children	range 8 months-15 years.
Age at first birth	range 18-23 years.
Education	3 dropped out of school without any qualifications; 1 left at 16 with CSEs.
Employment	4 not employed.

Three out of four of these women had, whilst growing up, been a part of the care system and their present family units had experienced (or still were experiencing) heavy involvement from Social Services. Each one of these recalled having very bad experiences at school, as a result of which they had dropped out of school and were now lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills. All four women lived on a large local Council estate.

5.2 Parents' comments

The following section reports the comments made by non-participating parents, in accordance with the manner in which the focus group topic guide was structured. This covered: concepts of learning and family learning; involvement in children's learning; motivations to learn and barriers to learning; foreseeable benefits and disbenefits of family learning; how such courses might be organised; and, ways in which parents might be encouraged to attend. As before, quotes are used to illustrate the various points raised.

- Learning for these parents was also construed in formal, practical terms, i.e. gaining a qualification to get a good job, as well as in more informal terms, i.e. life in general.

> *"Job – going to school, getting some 'A' levels and getting a good job." [Gloria]*

> *" It's work...everything...everything for your future." [Rebecca]*

- Family learning was similarly conceptualised as helping children at home with their homework and taking them on outings, as well as discussing problems with other family members.

> *"Things to do with them rather than just rolling around on the floor with them playing – they're learning as well." [Emily]*

> *"It's also with other families – discussions of the problems you might have." [Caroline]*

- Again, a whole host of people were recognised as taking part in family learning, especially grandparents, and again examples of lone mothers without any support network were uncovered, demonstrating that in these cases family learning could only involve the mother and her children.

> *"My children tend to go up to their Nan's a lot at weekends. She sits down – she seems to have more patience with them and they really do come on." [Caroline]*

> *"My Dad helps with Julian – he loves sitting down and counting with him." [Gloria]*

> *" I don't see any of my family so mine don't have that. It's just me and my kids." [Emily]*

- Family learning was again recognised as taking place everywhere, including the home, the street, museums, youth centres and libraries.

> *"Even walking to school you're learning, ' What type of tree is that?'" [Caroline]*

- These parents' involvement in their children's education ranged from none, through attending parents' evenings, to quite extensive liaison with the class teacher.

> *"I'm always asking how they're getting on, coming to parents' evenings." [Emily]*

> *"I have seen [my daughter's] teacher a couple of times, to ask how she's getting on and see if she's got any extra work, because she's special needs...and she needs extra help with her reading, so the teacher puts things in her bag, letters, you know, so I can tell by that way." [Caroline]*

- The motivation to learn reported by non-participating parents was, like the participating parents', either doing something for oneself (practical or emotional/personal) or doing something for one's children.

> *"You get something from it. If you've got a job and you've been studying on a course or something and you want to do something, you try hard to get it and when you do get it, you get a job, or wherever you want to go, and go higher on the ladder." [Caroline]*

> *"I didn't do sums at school – I wasn't allowed, so I never went to school. I don't really know that much about what they're doing. My oldest one is always saying, 'I know more than you'." [Emily]*

- The things cited as barriers to involvement in learning for this group were: previous bad experiences of learning; lack of time; lack of will power; laziness; and, financial costs of childcare and course attendance.

> *"Some [courses] go on for years don't they, they drag. By the time you finish it you might realise you don't want to do that.... It's the money as well though isn't it? You're paying for everything in your house, your rent, and by the time you've worked and paid all that, it's not worth even doing it really. You're better off [not studying]." [Emily]*

> *"Who wants to go on courses? I hated school so I'm not going to want to go to college!" [Gloria]*

- When asked to conceptualise what a family learning course might be about, these parents came up with ideas not dissimilar to the provision currently on offer, e.g. parenting skills or computer courses run by the council at schools.

> *"I get quite stressed out when people don't believe me. [A course could be about] Learning how to speak to your kids without shouting every five minutes. Getting them to listen to you as well instead of everything going in one ear and out the other." [Emily]*

When asked who would run such a course, and where it might be run, again, their answers were not dissimilar to the provision currently on offer, e.g. schools, councils. However, this group also thought that Social Services might run courses and although they felt that these courses were probably being delivered in formal educational settings, they felt strongly that they should take place in informal settings and 'taught' by another parent or a friend – someone with whom they were familiar.

> *"With another parent; people can talk to other parents a lot easier, when it's someone they know – you can express yourself more. You hold things back when it's someone you don't know. It makes it easier if it's a parent or a friend. Someone you've been involved with before I suppose." [Emily]*

- This group had a clear sense that there could be benefits to themselves from attending a family learning course. Like the participating parents' comments, these included practical issues such as acquiring new knowledge and skills, and personal issues such as pride in achievement and improved communication skills.

> *"It makes you feel proud of what you've done, don't it, you've got something, you've achieved something to show for it." [Caroline]*

> *"You'd be a changed person really, wouldn't you? You'd be out doing something you've never done before." [Emily]*

> *"I'd communicate with [my daughter] better...if I could learn the way she's learning I'd be able to sit down and communicate better with her." [Caroline]*

- This group were also able to cite benefits to their children, through their imagined attendance at a family-learning course. These related to understanding the current education system and being able to help with homework.

> *"Easier to understand what she's doing. It'd help a lot actually. She panics because I show her a different way to do things and it'd help stop that panic." [Caroline]*

> *"My children aren't coming home with homework yet but it would be handy to be prepared, to be able to help my children at home." [Emily]*

- These parents also felt that others would benefit from their attendance at a family learning course, essentially through them relaying the course information. Unlike the participating parents, the non-participants did not envisage benefits to others resulting from their enhanced communication skills; they spoke purely in factual terms of passing on information learnt.

> *"Whoever you communicate with really. You're passing on information that could help others. You could tell people you've been on a course and then they'd go and you're getting more people involved." [Caroline]*

- The possible disadvantages of attending a course that were cited as accruing to themselves, included: travelling a long way to an unfamiliar place; the costs involved; and, time spent neglecting other commitments. These parents seemed to be unaware that such courses might be run within their community during school hours, with free childcare provision for their younger children.

> *"Depends where you've got to go for it and the money to get there and who can have the kids while you're there, because obviously I've got no family near me or anyone...I keep getting letters from the Job Centre now that [my daughter] is 4 saying, 'Are you looking for work?' and all this lot, 'We'll help you, you'll be benefiting from all this extra money' but you don't get any extra money really, do you? They're not going to pay for childcare or things like that, which we can't afford." [Emily]*

- The main disadvantage reported which could relate to their children, as a result of the parent attending a family learning course, was that younger ones would not settle if left with strangers.

> *"Mine tend to play up when there's strangers around, they get a bit showing off, try and go so far with them, see how far they can get. I'd be too scared to leave mine with strangers." [Emily]*

- Unlike the participating parents, when asked if there could be any disadvantages to others, as a result of their hypothesised attendance at a family learning course, the non-participants could think of none.

- When asked how a family learning course should be designed to make it a success these parents stated that: it should involve small numbers of people they knew; it should be delivered at the appropriate level; the content should be clear, interesting and relevant; and, on-site childcare should be provided.

> *"Give us a choice, talk us through it. I've got no confidence so I couldn't just walk into a college and do all that. It'd be easier wouldn't it, a couple of us going that know each other." [Emily]*

> *"I find it really hard to sit around a big table of people." [Rebecca]*

> *"If you could find out more about the course before you went on it, it would be better, more information." [Caroline]*

- When asked what had prevented them from attending a family learning course so far, these parents mentioned: (i) *practical issues*, such as other family commitments; (ii) *emotional/psychological issues*, such as anxiety and fear of bureaucratic over-involvement; and, (iii) *course issues*, such as continuity of teaching.

> *"My partner works full-time from the early hours to late at night." [Rebecca]*

> *"It's just nerves I think, having the courage to get up and learn and let someone else tell you what to do again....It's hard work! ...It makes you look stupid, don't it? ...People are scared of Social Services really, aren't they? You don't want to keep getting them involved in your family life. You just get rid of them and then you get told, 'Well, you can have this if they refer you' and I'm thinking, no, I don't want to go through all of that again!" [Emily]*

> *"You get used to one person doing these courses, don't you, and a couple of weeks later there's another person. It's never just one person you can sit down and get on with." [Rebecca]*

- This group felt that people might be encouraged to attend a family learning course if they heard directly from other parents who had already been on the course. They also felt that there should be a change to the message of what the course was about rather than the course itself, i.e. clearer more simple information about the courses.

> *"Just tell them how much fun you've had, how much communication you've had with them [the children]." [Caroline]*

> *"There's a lot of dads that do come in to pick their kids up from school, a lot of them, but there's nothing aimed at just dads." [Emily]*

> *"Sometimes there's words in there [letters home from school] that you think, what?!" [Caroline]*

- Although a couple of these parents had not given any thought to attending a family learning course prior to the discussion, all were left stating that they were going to investigate what was available in their area.

> *"I haven't really thought about it...with five of them [children]!" [Gloria]*

> *"I want to go and learn computers because all the offices today are run by computers and I haven't got a clue. All I know is how to turn them on and how to turn them off." [Caroline]*

After a certain amount of initial suspicion and scepticism, I was able to draw these very disadvantaged women into a very expressive discussion of what family learning might look like to them and left them feeling that, after they had probed their own feelings, it was in fact an important issue. The lasting impression formed was one of their need to be coaxed and encouraged to participate, with promises of adequate support and follow-up.

6. Discussion

6.1 Summary of research

In response to a request from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) (in its former guise as the Department for Education and Employment - DfEE), a three-month qualitative research project has been undertaken to investigate family learning. The objective of this research was to obtain parents' perspectives on: what family learning might look like to them; what their expectations of it might be; how they would want it to happen and where; what they might get out of it; and, what is the right way of describing it from their point of view, i.e. a bottom-up approach.

In order to meet this objective a series of 'focus group' discussions with parents who *were* participating, and who *were not* participating, in organised family learning initiatives, were carried out. The research collected the views of parents involved in six different family learning courses (at nursery and primary schools and a secondary school), four of which were numeracy courses and two of which were literacy courses. In each of these, parents spent time learning with their children as well spending time learning on their own. These parents came from a broad range of family structures and ethnic and educational backgrounds. Two of the discussions were carried out in one London borough and the remaining discussions and interviews were carried out in another London borough.

The research findings reported here are thus based upon five focus group discussions with a total of twenty-five family learning course participants, two in-depth interviews with family learning course participants, and one focus group discussion with four non-participating parents (i.e. thirty-one parents in total).

It is clear from these findings that the overall impression formed by the parents and children participating in family learning initiatives is a very positive one. All of the parents had enjoyed their course and could see a large number of benefits to themselves, to their children and to others, from attending. After a certain amount of initial scepticism, the non-participating parents concluded that family learning was in fact an important issue although it was clear that they would need to be coaxed and encouraged to participate in these courses, with promises of adequate support and follow-up.

6.2 Research caveats

Before discussing what this research can tell us about how family learning courses should be organised in the future or offering suggestions for future research, attention should first be turned to some of the shortcomings of this research. The first of these is that data collection was focused on those people who were involved, or had been involved, in a family learning course. This was in recognition that there may have been some parents who find it difficult to grasp the concept of family learning and imagine and convey their ideal scenario (especially those who are less confident, less articulate and less educated, i.e. precisely those we might expect to benefit most from attending such a course). However, one could argue that since a group of non-participating parents was interviewed, the members of whom provided a wealth of very articulate information concerning their views of family learning and reasons for non-participation, the findings have been balanced somewhat. This was also a group of women who were very disadvantaged; precisely those that one might expect could benefit greatly from involvement in a family learning initiative and whose opinions were thus invaluable.

All but one of the participants was female, which could introduce a heavy gender bias to the views reported. Although it was clear that these courses were mainly attended by mothers, it was apparent that a couple of fathers did attend some of the groups, however, on the days that I arrived to carry out the focus group discussions only one father had attended. Whilst one might assume that males are less likely to talk emotionally and personally about the subject of family learning and might have stayed away from the course purposefully on the day that they anticipated a researcher arriving, I got the impression that most parents were not aware of the research discussion prior to my arrival and thus it was merely a matter of circumstance that only one father was interviewed.

Another thing to consider when reviewing the research findings of the participant parents, is that their comments all relate to literacy or numeracy courses, which they attended during the day. This project did not therefore gather views of those attending other types of family learning courses (e.g. arts and crafts, sports, parenting skills, IT) or those run in the evenings, which might attract a higher male attendance as well as those in full-time work. Thus, the views collected were those of a largely female non-

working population. In addition, all of the courses attended were based in London, which could introduce a geographical bias to the results.

One should also be aware that a positive skew to the results might be expected owing to the fact that teachers on the courses volunteered to have their parents interviewed and, as such, the interviews may have only been conducted with those on successful courses; it is unlikely that teachers of courses that were less successful would have volunteered for participation in this research. In addition, the parents on these courses were 'self-selecting' and one could assume that these are the types of people who are more interested in their children's education, which would also give a positive skew to the results. However, a group of non-participating parents was interviewed which proved to be a useful corrective.

This research could also be criticised for being very short and small-scale, providing only a snapshot of the views of a handful of parents in relation to these issues, and that one could not and should not generalise these findings to the population at large. This is absolutely true, however, one should not underestimate the value of qualitative research such as this, whose main aim is to unpack the issues and themes surrounding a particular subject with a group of people from diverse backgrounds and wide ranging experiences. Indeed, research such as this can be used to inform further qualitative research and/or the design of larger-scale projects of a more quantitative nature.

6.3 Conclusion

The comments made by all of the parents interviewed were remarkably consistent across age, ethnic groups and marital status, and, where relevant, across type of course, age of child attending course and course location. There was a very small effect of educational attainment on the comments of some of the participating parents yet due to the small numbers involved it would be difficult to draw any conclusions about this without further investigation.

It is clear that the overall impression formed by the parents participating in family learning initiatives is a positive one. All of them had enjoyed their course and could see a large number of benefits to themselves, to their children and to others, from attending. These benefits ranged from practical and tangible gains (e.g. a certificate of achievement, improved vocabulary of child) to emotional and psychological gains (e.g. rediscovery of 'old' self, increased confidence in themselves and their children). The comments from teachers and pupils at one centre also add further weight to these benefits, validating the opinions of the parents involved. The benefits cited by participating parents were closely tied to their motivations to learn and in this sense, one might say that their pursuit of learning had the desired effect.

Both participating and non-participating parents were clear that learning and family learning could be carried out almost anywhere and by a wide range of people, most especially themselves, their children and their children's grandparents. However, this research highlights the fact that there is a group of parents who have no partner or extended family to call upon to take part in family learning. In this instance they feel very much that it is just them and their child(ren) who could be involved.

The reasons that non-participating parents quoted for not participating in (family) learning related to their previous bad experiences of learning at school. They were also very cognisant of the fact that they lacked the will-power to get involved in something more organised and also expressed some concern at attending a course in a formal educational setting where they'd be with a large group of strangers in front of whom they may look stupid. When they spoke of time, distance and the financial costs of childcare as additional barriers to learning, they seemed to be unaware of the

existence of courses that were actually being run in their community in less formal settings with free crèche facilities. This probably says something about the way in which those courses were being promoted or advertised; these parents recognised that they were more likely to get involved in such initiatives if they heard from other parents who'd been involved, as opposed to receiving wordy letters from the school.

The results from the parents interviewed show that family learning courses had been (or would be) successful if they addressed three main areas:

(1) *practical issues* – courses should: be free; be organised and explained clearly and simply; be easily accessed; offer a choice of content; be tailored to suit the individual; take place in an informal friendly atmosphere; offer free on-site childcare; provide adequate follow-up and support with progression routes;

(2) *issues relating to other 'students'* – other students (parents) should be: known or familiar; non-judgmental; keen to learn; work as a team; have things in common; and,

(3) *issues relating to the teacher* – the teacher should: be supportive and encouraging; be non-intimidating and respectful; recognise individuals' capabilities; have a good approach to the children; also be a parent; never act superior to the students.

This, in association with the recommendations made from participating parents as to how their course could have been improved, have formed the basis for recommendations as to how future family learning courses such as this should be planned and delivered (referred to in section 6.4).

The results of this research reiterate the findings in the OFSTED report (2000), which states that models of family learning are more successful at attracting participants from disadvantaged and under-represented groups where the curriculum is broad. Their report also identifies that family learning practitioners are very dedicated, thus recognising the qualities required to make a successful family learning teacher. One could assume that their dedication is a product of the fact that they can see how effective family learning is for those who participate and this was certainly a feeling expressed by all of the teachers that I met during the course of this research project. The parents interviewed certainly had a clear idea that family learning teachers were

quite different to those they'd experienced at school, which for them was a positive thing, and they felt that such teachers should have qualities that allow them to relate to adults in a non-patronising way. This obviously has implications for the training of family learning teachers.

6.4 Recommendations

So, bearing in mind the nature of this research, some tentative recommendations can be made based upon the parental perspectives uncovered in this research, regarding how successful family learning literacy and numeracy initiatives should be designed and delivered in the future, as follows:

Marketing

- Family learning courses should be advertised in a way that emphasises classes will not be reminiscent of parents' early formal education.
- In promoting classes, organisations should avoid wordy letters sent home with children. They should concentrate on colourful posters which emphasise the benefits to children.
- Organisations running family learning courses should also consider open-days for parents to come in and observe a class in practice. They should encourage parents who've already been on the courses to talk to other parents about their experiences, emphasising that they were taught how to teach their children, made aware of the current education system, and benefited from the quality time they spent with their children and making new friends.
- Organisations should encourage parents to enrol with a friend or promote the fact that friends can be made if they get involved.

Course structure

- Family learning courses should be free.
- The information about the courses should be clear and simple.
- Courses should be easily accessed, i.e. located in the local community, and widely available.
- Courses should take place in an informal friendly atmosphere.
- Free on-site childcare should be made available.

- Courses should start late enough in the morning to allow parents time to complete all child and household-related responsibilities, e.g. dropping children off at various locations.
- Courses should run in tandem with standard educational terms in order that: (1) more content/topics can be covered; and (2) participants' interest is maintained by shorter gaps between courses or levels within courses.
- Adequate follow-up and support should be provided, along with clear routes of progression.
- Courses should offer a choice of content and be flexible, i.e. they should be tailored to suit the individual.
- Individual courses should cover a diversity of topics to ensure that they are engaging and interesting.
- Ways should be devised for parents to work with their children in joint sessions which result in the least disruption to their child's usual routine and which do not remove their child from other valuable lessons.
- Courses should provide parents with an overview of the course so that they know what will be covered each week, to allow preparation.
- The 'students' (parents) on the courses should be small in number and known or familiar. They should also have things in common, e.g. be of a similar age group, be of the same gender, be of a similar educational attainment.

Teachers

- Family learning course teachers should be trained how to teach adults. This would result in them being supportive, encouraging, non-intimidating, respectful and non-patronising. They should not act as if superior to their students and they should not interrogate students when they miss a class. They should facilitate the 'catching-up' of missed material. *(I recognise that many family learning courses are already taught by schoolteachers or adult tutors; this point aims to highlight this training requirement as a necessity for all.)*

- Course teachers should be experienced and able to recognise individuals' capabilities.
- Course teachers should be capable of dealing with children of all ages and abilities, and preferably be a parent themselves.
- Course teachers should encourage students to be non-judgmental, keen to learn and work as a team.

6.5 Looking to the future

On the theme of future research, more qualitative research could be conducted involving: different types of non-participants (e.g. those who are in full-time work); participating and non-participating males; those who attend evening courses; those who attend courses addressing subjects other than literacy and numeracy; family learning teachers. Indeed, following this, in order to make sound objective evidence-based recommendations for how family learning should be organised in the future, it would be necessary to undertake a longer-term quantitative piece of research, informed by the issues raised in the qualitative research, on a far larger sample size in a far wider range of locations and courses.

Most documents about family learning emphasise the need for a clear policy (e.g. Buffton 1999; Campaign for Learning, 2001); this document is no exception. Family learning initiatives would benefit from better planning at the centre and longer-term funding. These would promote more even, equitable and responsive provision.

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WIDER BENEFITS OF LEARNING RESEARCH REPORT NO.2

The Wider Benefits of Learning Research Report No. 2

This paper reports the findings from a qualitative research project undertaken to investigate parents' perspectives of family learning, specifically: what family learning might look like to them; what their expectations of it might be; how they would want it to happen and where; what they might get out of it; and, what is the right way of describing it from their point of view, i.e. a bottom-up approach.

Findings are reported from focus group discussions carried out with parents who were participating in organised family learning literacy and numeracy programmes, as well as parents who were not involved in formal family learning programmes. Their comments relate to: definitions of family learning; motivations and barriers to learning; advantages and disadvantages of family learning to themselves, children and others; how family learning courses can be successful; and, how to encourage others to participate in family learning. Recommendations have been made based on these comments, relating to: the marketing of family learning courses; the design of family learning courses; and, the training and qualities of family learning tutors.

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